

Hamlet Coursework: sample question

“Hamlet sees Gertrude give way to Claudius, [and] Ophelia give way to Polonius...” (David Leverenz) (AO4)

Examine how Shakespeare treats the female characters/ explores (AO3) the role of the woman in *Hamlet* and what the response of a modern audience (AO5) might be to this aspect of the play.

AO1- covered with whole approach

AO2- drama (dramatic terms, audience, dramatic effects, staging)

Other quotes you could use (from *Hamlet: Contemporary Critical Essays* ed. Martin Coyle, Macmillan 1992)

- “Gertrude’s inconstancy not only brings on disgust and incestuous feelings, it is also the sign of diseased doubleness in everyone who has accommodated to his or her social role.” (David Leverenz)
- “The divided self: in her madness, there is no one there. She is not a person. There is no integral selfhood expressed through her actions or utterances... She has already died. There is now only a vacuum where there once was a person.” (R. D. Laing)
- “...there are many voices in Ophelia’s madness speaking through her... none of them her own. She becomes the mirror for a mad-inducing world.” (David Leverenz)
- “[Ophelia’s] history is an instance of how someone can be driven mad by having her inner feelings misrepresented, not responded to, or acknowledged only through chastisement and repression. From her entrance on, Ophelia must continually respond to commands which imply distrust even as they compel obedience.” (David Leverenz)
- “[Ophelia] has no choice but to say ‘I shall obey, my lord’” (David Leverenz)
- “Not allowed to love and unable to be false, Ophelia breaks. She goes mad rather than gets mad. Even in her madness she has no voice of her own, only a discord of other voices and expectations, customs gone awry.” (David Leverenz)

- “[Ophelia] is a play within a play, or a player trying to respond to several imperious directors at once. Everyone has used her: Polonius, to gain favour; Laertes, to belittle Hamlet; Claudius, to spy on Hamlet; Hamlet to express rage at Gertrude; and Hamlet again, to express his feigned madness with her as a decoy. She is valued only for the roles that further other people’s plots.” (David Leverenz)
- “For most critics of Shakespeare, Ophelia has been an insignificant minor character in the play, touching in her weakness and madness but chiefly interesting, of course, in what she tells us about Hamlet.” (Elaine Showalter)
- “We can imagine Hamlet’s story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet.” (Lee Edwards)
- “Since the 1970s... we have had a feminist discourse which has offered a new perspective on Ophelia’s madness as protest and rebellion. For many feminist theorists, the madwoman is a heroine, a powerful figure who rebels against the family and the social order...” (Elaine Showalter)
- “Gertrude, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, has traditionally been played as a sensual, deceitful woman.” (Rebecca Smith)
- “...when one closely examines Gertrude’s actual speech and actions in an attempt to understand the character, one finds little that hints at hypocrisy, suppression, or uncontrolled passion and their implied complexity.” (Rebecca Smith)
- “Gertrude appears in only ten of the twenty scenes that comprise the play; furthermore she speaks very little, having less dialogue than any other major character in *Hamlet*... she speaks plainly, directly, and chastely when she does speak... Gertrude’s brief speeches include references to honour, virtue [etc]; neither structure nor content suggests wantonness.” (Rebecca Smith)
- “Gertrude believes that quiet women best please men, and pleasing men is Gertrude’s main interest.” (Rebecca Smith)
- “Gertrude has not moved toward independence or a heightened moral stance; only her divided loyalties and her unhappiness intensify.” (Rebecca Smith)